The Violence of Demanded Hope: A Response to "Entering the Kingdom of Heaven"

Executive Summary

A Catholic daily reflection interprets Matthew 11:11-12 ("the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force") as a call to forceful pursuit of holiness through cooperation with grace. This reading assumes the reader wants to be alive and simply needs help redirecting that desire toward better spiritual objects.

Lay theologian Boyd Camak argues this framework is backwards and harmful. His core claims:

1. **Crucifixion is the baseline human condition**, not a deviation. Christianity reveals God from the cross (the bottom), not from success (the top). Defining reality from the functional perspective while treating the crucified as outliers is a violent philosophical choice—functionally Nietzschean, not Christian.
2. **Hope as demanded performance is spiritual bypassing.** When formally correct theology ("hope is a gift of the Spirit") gets pastorally deployed as "you should be experiencing hope," it adds spiritual failure to existing crucifixion. The battered wife told to "have hope her husband will change" is bound by that "hope," not freed by it.
3. **Hope cannot be defined without being weaponized.** It can only be experienced as wound-to-wound contact with the crucified Christ, especially in the Eucharist. Any conceptual definition decays into human categories that harm the suffering.

This isn't novel theology but recovery of what Job, the Psalmists, Luther, the Desert Fathers, John of the Cross, Simone Weil, Teresa of Calcutta, and Moltmann have known: faithfulness doesn't require feeling hope. Presence doesn't require explanation. God doesn't demand what only He can give.

The Catholic reflection, despite formal orthodoxy, functionally operates from a Nietzschean baseline, turns Kingdom participation into achievement, and makes crucifixion a spiritual project requiring better cooperation. This is violence disguised as discipleship. The liberation is permission to name hell as hell, receive hope only if the Spirit gives it, and trust Christ's presence without producing feelings or explanations we cannot generate.

A recent Catholic daily reflection on Matthew 11:11-12 offers this interpretation of Christ's words about the Kingdom suffering violence: "The 'violence' spoken of by our Lord is the interior battle against sin so as to fervently embrace the holy will of God... We must pray for an abundance of grace to move beyond mediocrity to a fervent faith so that we may take hold of the glorious riches of the Kingdom of Heaven."

This reading assumes something fundamental: **you want to be alive.**

It simply redirects which kind of alive you should pursue—not earthly success but Kingdom membership, not temporal happiness but eternal life, not your own strength but divine grace. The underlying appetite for existence remains unquestioned. The call is to "cooperate with grace" and "become a more active member" of God's Kingdom through "forceful pursuit."

But what if you don't want to be alive at all?

The Question the Reflection Cannot Answer

For those experiencing unsolvable suffering—chronic illness, profound loss, economic devastation, existential despair—lay theologian Boyd Camak argues that the Catholic reflection's framework is fundamentally backwards. The issue isn't how to redirect desire toward better objects. The issue is that the reflection assumes a baseline (functional spiritual life) that isn't baseline at all.

Camak's core claim: **Crucifixion is the baseline human condition, not a deviation from it.** This isn't subjective experience or pessimistic choice—it's a philosophical claim about where reality actually is. Most Christianity operates from:

- Baseline = functional, stable, able to work and maintain relationships
- Suffering = deviation from baseline, problem to be solved
- Goal = return to functional baseline

Camak argues this is violent because it makes the crucified into outliers whose testimony doesn't count in defining human reality. The alternative:

- Baseline = crucifixion, suffering, problems with no solutions
- Functionality = temporary reprieve, not-yet-fully-crucified
- Goal = not escape but presence in the suffering

This is what he calls the **"Übermensch on the Cross" argument**: You must choose whose experience defines reality—the functional or the crucified. Christianity claims God reveals Himself in the crucified (the cross, "blessed are the poor"). But most modern Christianity still defines normal from the functional perspective, which means it's operating from Nietzsche's framework while using Christian language.

Someone in this position—someone for whom crucifixion is baseline, not deviation—is not helped by being told to "move beyond mediocrity to fervent faith" or "take hold of the glorious riches of the Kingdom" or "cooperate with grace to achieve Kingdom participation through forceful pursuit."

This is not hope. This is violence.

Hope as Gift Versus Hope as Performance

The Catholic Catechism defines hope as "the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and

eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit" (CCC 1817). Formally, this acknowledges hope as gift—a theological virtue given by the Spirit, not produced by human effort.

But watch what happens in pastoral application.

The reflection transforms this gift into a demand: "We must pray for an abundance of grace." "We are called to fight this battle." "This interior battle should be fought daily." The language shifts from receiving to achieving, from gift to project, from trust to performance.

Even when theology formally affirms that hope is given by the Spirit, the practical deployment becomes: "You should be experiencing hope. If you're not, pray harder. Fight more. Pursue more fervently." The person's inability to generate hopeful feelings becomes evidence of spiritual failure—which adds guilt to their existing crucifixion.

Camak identifies this as **spiritual bypassing**: using theological concepts to avoid facing present reality. It functions exactly like telling a battered wife to "have hope your husband will change"—binding her to the situation under the guise of faithfulness.

What the Tradition Has Forgotten

This violent deployment of "hope" represents not orthodoxy but amnesia. The Christian tradition contains robust resources for those who have no appetite for existence:

Job never receives an explanation for his suffering. He cries "Why did I not die at birth?" (Job 3:11). God shows up in the whirlwind and essentially says, "I'm here, this is beyond you, and that's going to have to be enough." No transformation narrative. No purpose revealed. Just presence.

Jeremiah curses the day he was born: "Cursed be the day I was born!" (Jer 20:14). He wishes he'd never existed but cannot escape God's call.

Elijah asks God to take his life: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life" (1 Kings 19:4). God doesn't rebuke him for lack of hope. God feeds him and keeps him going.

The Psalmists rage at God without resolution. "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Psalm 13). "Why do you hide your face and forget our misery?" (Psalm 44). These are not presented as faithlessness requiring correction but as legitimate prayer.

Martin Luther's theology of the cross (theologia crucis, 1518) established that God is revealed in suffering, not in speculation or reason. "Theologians of glory" try to climb up to God through achievement; "theologians of the cross" know God only reveals himself "in suffering, death, and contradiction to expectation." The cross is the only source of knowledge about who God is. Luther taught that Christians will experience "the cross and suffering in this life"—not as failure but as the location of God's self-revelation.

The Desert Fathers (3rd-5th century) went to the desert explicitly to die to self, not to achieve great things. Evagrius Ponticus wrote extensively on *acedia*—spiritual despair, death of the soul—describing monks who

had no desire for life, no hope, but continued. His remedy wasn't "have hope!" but: stay in your cell, pray without words, be present. The *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* are full of monks saying "I have no hope" and elders responding not with correction but with silence and presence.

John of the Cross (16th century) taught that in the dark night of the soul, "the soul feels... that God has abandoned it." No consolation, no feeling of hope, no sense of progress. The spiritual direction is: **don't try to produce feelings you don't have.** Just stay in the darkness—that IS the path. Not producing hopeful affect is not the problem. Demanding hopeful affect is the problem.

Simone Weil (20th century) wrote that "the extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering but a supernatural use for it." Not transformation out of affliction, but Christ in it. Affliction (*malheur*) is participation in Christ's crucifixion—not something to be overcome but something that reveals reality. She refused baptism because she couldn't affirm hope she didn't feel, yet she couldn't escape Christ's presence.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (20th century) wrote from Nazi prison: "Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine." Not "I have hope!" but "I don't even know who I am, but apparently I'm still Yours." Faithfulness without feeling, presence without explanation.

Teresa of Calcutta's private letters (published after her death) revealed decades of spiritual darkness: "I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing." She continued not from hope she could feel but because she couldn't shake Christ's presence—even when she wished she could. Her faithfulness consisted precisely in serving without the consolation of feeling God's presence or experiencing hope.

Jürgen Moltmann wrote *The Crucified God* (1972) after learning about Auschwitz as a German POW. He argued that after Auschwitz, traditional theodicy—explaining why suffering happens—is obscene. "To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon." Where is God in the concentration camp? Dying with the victim on the gallows. "God and suffering are no longer contradictions"—suffering is an aspect of God's very being. The cross is not a problem to solve but an act of ultimate solidarity.

Crucifixion as Baseline, Not Deviation

Camak's theological contribution is naming crucifixion as **the baseline human condition**, not a deviation from it. This isn't phenomenology (how suffering feels) or psychology (depression). It's an ontological and epistemological claim: **This is what human life actually is when you see all the way down.**

The Catholic reflection operates from the assumption that functional spiritual life is normal, and mediocrity/sin are problems to be overcome through forceful advancement. But what if this is backwards?

Camak argues: "Life is hell. Not because of any particular condition, but because that's what being human is. Everyone gets crucified. Everyone experiences life as hell. Everyone has a crisis point." The dreams we have cannot be fulfilled, or if fulfilled, they're partial. And even if dreams were completely fulfilled, "we would still be utterly miserable." This isn't pessimism—it's "recognizing the true predicament of being human, how nothing will satisfy us."

The critical question becomes: Who sees reality most clearly?

- The person who can work, maintain relationships, find meaning—and treats extreme suffering as deviation whose perspective is distorted?
- Or the person experiencing crucifixion, who has stripped away all buffers, privileges, and distractions?

If we define humanity from the functional perspective and bracket off those in extreme suffering as outliers, we are making what Camak calls "a violent philosophical choice"—accepting that their testimony doesn't count. "They become expendable, cannon fodder, acceptable losses whose testimony we can bracket off when determining the truth about human existence." This is functionally Nietzsche's framework: the strong and flourishing define reality.

But Christianity explicitly teaches that God reveals Himself in weakness (the cross). "Blessed are the poor, because theirs is the kingdom of God"—not unfortunate people whom we should help, but people who see clearly because their life is "more precarious, more dependent, less oftentimes distracted by intellectual gymnastics."

As Camak writes: "We have a dead man on a tree... And so what we have is solidarity. We have the solidarity of God. God is in the trenches with us." If God defines the human condition from the cross—from the absolute bottom—then the person experiencing profound suffering isn't experiencing a deviation from human life. They're experiencing its most honest form.

From this baseline, the functional aren't experiencing "real" human condition—they're "simply in temporary reprieve, or protected by circumstance, or not-yet-crucified. They haven't seen through everything yet."

The violence occurs when we tell people their clear sight is the problem. When we demand they generate hope, produce fervor, pursue advancement, cooperate with transformation—when what they're actually seeing is reality, and we're asking them to accept a distortion.

What Hope Cannot Be (If You Don't Want to Be Alive)

If the problem is not misdirected desire but no desire at all, then hope cannot mean:

- Wanting to be alive
- Seeing light at the end of the tunnel
- Feeling hopeful
- Having reasons to go on
- Pursuing advancement in the Kingdom
- Forcefully taking hold of glorious riches

These all assume an appetite for existence that many people in profound suffering simply do not have.

What Hope Might Actually Be: Camak's Orthodox Recovery

Camak articulates hope as something that "cannot be articulated other than in wounds and suffering together in solidarity—especially in the Eucharist." Any attempt to describe the concept is "necessarily inadequate and probably dangerous because hope is something central to life, and if you have something floating around that's not the right thing, it's like a sharp knife being thrown around."

This understanding is profoundly orthodox. Consider:

The **Apostles' Creed**: "I believe in... the resurrection of the body." Not "I believe I can imagine my way to peace about resurrection." Not "I believe resurrection makes sense when I think about it." Just: "I believe in it"—trust, not comprehension.

Romans 8:24-26: "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

Paul is explicit: hope is for what we cannot see or produce. When we don't even know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes with wordless groans. Hope is not something we generate through right thinking—it's gift, it's beyond words, it's what the Spirit does when we have nothing.

Hebrews 11:1: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The entire chapter catalogs people who died without receiving what was promised (11:13, 11:39)—their faithfulness consisted precisely in trusting without seeing, hoping without experiencing fulfillment.

Camak's "hope beyond concepts" stands with:

- **Job**, who never gets explanation, only God's presence: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (Job 42:5)—not understanding but encounter
- **The Psalmists**: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (Psalm 27:13)—but this coexists with "How long, O Lord?" (Psalm 13:1) and no resolution
- **Teresa of Calcutta**, whose hope consisted in serving despite decades of darkness: "If I ever become a Saint—I will surely be one of 'darkness.' I will continually be absent from Heaven—to light the light of those in darkness on earth"
- **John of the Cross**, who taught the dark night is not failure but the path itself—don't try to produce consolation you don't have

Why This Is More Orthodox Than Demanded Hope

The Catholic reflection's "hope" is actually closer to therapeutic optimism than theological virtue:

Catholic Catechism (correctly): Hope is "the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit" (CCC 1817). Hope is **gift** (theological virtue), not achievement (moral virtue).

Catholic reflection (incorrectly): "We must pray for an abundance of grace." "We are called to fight this battle." "This interior battle should be fought daily." This transforms gift into project, receiving into achieving, trust into performance.

Camak's correction: You cannot produce what only the Spirit can give. Demanding people "have hope" when they see no reason for it is demanding they do something impossible. This demand functions as captivity: the person feels they're failing spiritually because they can't generate feelings they don't have. Better to name accurately ("I have no hope") than perform falsely.

Scripture supports this:

- Jesus in Gethsemane: "Remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want" (Mark 14:36)—desiring escape while trusting God, no resolution of the tension
- Jesus on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)—quoting Psalm 22, the prayer of abandonment, as faithful prayer
- Paul: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair" (2 Cor 4:8)—perplexed (no answers) coexists with not despairing, but Paul doesn't claim to feel hopeful

Hope is:

- Attaching your wounds to Christ's wounds
- Radical unity with Him through wounds
- Beyond words (like the Spirit interpreting groans too deep for words in Romans 8:26)
- Not a concept to think about but flesh and wounds to experience
- Known only in the Eucharist—eaten, not analyzed

When God gives us a dead man on a tree, He gives us a dead man on a tree. This is not a concept. This is not an explanation of suffering's purpose. This is not a promise about future transformation. This is flesh. This is wounds. This **is** love—not as idea but as reality.

You cannot think it. You cannot talk about it. You can only experience it.

Orthodox theologians and Pope Benedict XVI both approach this understanding. Benedict writes in *Spe Salvi* that hope is not optimism but trust that God is present even in suffering—"the one who has hope lives differently," not because they feel different but because presence changes reality even when circumstances

don't. The Orthodox tradition emphasizes hope as participatory and experiential rather than conceptual—something known through theosis (union with God) rather than analyzed through rational categories.

But Camak takes it further: **hope cannot be defined without decaying into human concepts that inevitably get weaponized against the suffering.** The **Apophatic tradition** (negative theology) has long recognized this. Pseudo-Dionysius (5th-6th century) taught that God is known by unknowing—any definition of God is necessarily inadequate. *The Cloud of Unknowing* (14th century) instructs: "Beat upon that thick cloud of unknowing with the dart of your longing love"—not understanding, not feeling, just being there. Hope beyond concepts.

The Only Thing

In Camak's *Fragments of Rumination*, he writes: "Sins hurt us because they distract our focus/attention/purpose/motivation/intention/longing/hope-for-solace from Christ *crucified*—THE ONLY THING that can transfigure our psycho-social-emotional-existential hell of a life."

Not Christ risen (primarily). Not Christ teaching. Not Christ relevant to our goals. Christ **crucified** is what transfigures hell.

Transfigure does not mean remove. Does not mean explain. Does not mean make bearable. Does not mean reveal purpose.

Transfigure means: makes it not-lie. Names it as hell while Christ is in it. The presence doesn't change the hell, but it changes it from meaningless hell to witnessed hell, companioned hell.

"Christ cannot be analyzed or figured out," Camak writes. "He can only be eaten, drunk, worshiped, cleaned, wounded, ignored, forgotten, loved, adored, consummated, crucified."

The Eucharist is the model: you don't analyze it, you don't understand it, you **eat** it.

Hope is the same.

What Christ Has to Say to the Hopeless

Not: "Have hope! Think about the Kingdom! Pursue advancement! Cooperate with grace!"

But: "I'm here. In your hell. I'm not explaining it. I'm not fixing it. I'm not telling you it has purpose. I'm just here. You can't shake Me because this is exactly where I am—with the crucified."

For those who have no appetite for existence, who cannot produce hopeful feelings, who see no light and no exit, Christ does not offer a self-improvement project. He offers His wounds.

Some days that's enough to stay one more day. Some days it isn't. But the adequacy or inadequacy isn't in our understanding or our feelings or our forceful pursuit.

It's just in the flesh, the wounds, the presence.

The Liberation

The Catholic reflection binds people to perpetual striving. It makes Kingdom participation contingent on successful cooperation, fervent faith, forceful pursuit, daily interior battle. It adds spiritual metrics to material suffering.

The alternative is not hopelessness. The alternative is freedom.

From Luther: "A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is" (Heidelberg Disputation, 1518). Freedom to name hell as hell without being told this is negative thinking. Freedom to call crucifixion "crucifixion" without being told it's actually an opportunity for spiritual advancement.

From John of the Cross: The dark night is not failure requiring correction but the path itself. Freedom to have no consolation, no sense of God's presence, no hopeful feelings—and remain faithful. "The soul feels... that God has abandoned it" is not the problem; demanding the soul produce feelings of presence is the problem.

From Simone Weil: "The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering but a supernatural use for it." Freedom from the demand that suffering be remedied, explained, or made productive. The "use" is wound-to-wound contact with Christ, not achievement of better spiritual states.

From Teresa of Calcutta: Her private darkness—"I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing"—lasted decades while she continued serving. Freedom to serve without feeling, to continue without consolation, to remain faithful while experiencing absence. Her superiors didn't demand she "have more hope"—they witnessed her darkness as legitimate faithfulness.

From Moltmann: After Auschwitz, theodicy is obscene. "To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon." Freedom from explaining why God allows suffering. Freedom from being God's defense attorney. "God and suffering are no longer contradictions"—God suffers with us, and that's the only thing that can be said.

What this freedom actually means:

Freedom to have no hope without being told this is spiritual failure. The person who accurately names "I have no hope—not for better circumstances, not for death as exit, not for anything I can imagine" is seeing clearly, not failing spiritually. Hope, if it comes, comes as pure gift from the Spirit. If it doesn't come, that doesn't mean the Spirit has abandoned them or they're not praying correctly. It means they're being honest about what they see and what they feel. Faithfulness consists in staying present to Christ's presence (whether felt or not) without producing false affect.

Freedom to hate your life and wish it were over without being told you need to pursue Kingdom advancement. This is not unfaithfulness. This is honesty. Job, Jeremiah, Elijah, Jesus in Gethsemane—all wished for escape. The faithfulness is not in wanting to be alive but in staying because you can't shake God's presence even when you wish you could.

Freedom to attach your wounds to Christ's wounds without needing to understand what that means or what it accomplishes. The Eucharist model: eat it, don't analyze it. Hope as wound-to-wound contact happens in the body, in the flesh, in the eating—not in the understanding.

Freedom to be crucified without making it a project of becoming a better Kingdom member. The crucifixion is not a spiritual curriculum. It's not building your character. It's not conforming you to anything. It just *is*. Christ is there in it. That's all that can be said.

This is not novel theology. This is recovery of what the Desert Fathers, John of the Cross, Simone Weil, Teresa of Calcutta, and countless others have known: faithfulness does not require feeling. Presence does not require explanation. Hope cannot be produced.

The Violence Exposed

When Christians tell the suffering to "have hope," even with the best theological credentials, even with formal acknowledgment that hope is gift—the functional effect is violence.

It prevents accurate naming ("this is hell" becomes "you're being negative").

It prevents protective action (can't leave situations because "God might be working").

It transfers responsibility (your lack of hope/faith is why you're not experiencing transformation).

It sacralizes suffering (makes endurance a virtue rather than tragedy).

The Catholic reflection, for all its formal orthodoxy, participates in this violence. It takes people who are already crucified and tells them to pursue more forcefully, fight more fervently, cooperate more actively.

This is not hope. This is abuse disguised as discipleship.

What Must Be Said

To those who have no appetite for existence: Your clear sight is not spiritual failure. Your inability to generate hope is not lack of faith. Your accurate naming of hell as hell is not negativity requiring correction.

As Karl Barth insisted in his **modified patripassianism** (the theological position that God the Father suffers with God the Son—a modification of the heresy that Father and Son are the same person), God's being is "a being in the act of suffering"—the Father participates in the Son's passion. God is not above your crucifixion explaining it, not transforming it into a Kingdom advancement opportunity. God is in it. His wounds against your wounds.

That might be enough. It might not be. But it's what's true.

And truth—however unbearable—is liberation compared to demanded performance of hope you cannot produce.

The Kingdom of Heaven does suffer violence. But what is this violence?

The Catholic reflection reads it as: forceful pursuit of holiness by the disciple—"we must fight this battle," "interior violence against sin," aggressive advancement in Kingdom participation.

Camak's reading: The violence is what crucifixion does to a person, and what gets done to the crucified when they're told their suffering is a spiritual project requiring better cooperation. The "violent" who "take it by force" might be those who violently refuse self-rescue projects, who violently trust what they cannot produce, who forcefully remain present in unbearable reality rather than escaping into false hope.

Is this interpretation within orthodox bounds? It's a minority reading, but that says something about the majority: most interpretations come from those who haven't experienced unsolvable suffering. Those who have often find that "forceful pursuit" language cruel—what they need is permission to stop pursuing, stop producing, stop cooperating with transformation projects that aren't happening.

The broader biblical context supports reading Matthew 11:12 alongside 11:28-30: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

How can both be true—violent force AND easy yoke? If the violence is against ourselves (our need to control/explain/achieve), then once we stop that violence against ourselves, the yoke becomes easy. Stop the project of self-improvement, and what's left is simple presence with Christ. That's not effortless, but it's not the grinding treadmill of perpetual spiritual advancement either.

May we stop inflicting this violence in the name of hope.

May we give the crucified permission to be crucified without turning it into a curriculum.

May we learn again what the tradition once knew: that faithfulness sometimes looks like having no hope, no desire for life, while being unable to shake the presence of a God who won't leave you alone even when you wish He would. As Luther insisted, this IS the theology of the cross—God revealed precisely in "suffering, death, and contradiction to expectation."

That's the cross, and Christ is there.

Wounds to wounds.

That's all there is.

That's all there needs to be.